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January 5, 1983

MEMORANDUM FOR: National Intelligence Officer for Near East
South Asia

FROM:

Chief, Pakistan/Afghanistan/Bangladesh Branch,
NESA, DDI

SUBJECT: Afghanistan: Potential for Soviet Airfield
Construction

Attached is our response to the DCI's inquiry on the above
subject. The response was prepared by [redacted] of my
branch and coordinated with SOVA. [redacted]

Attachment: a/s

NESA M 83-10004CX

NGA Review Completed

TOP SECRET

[Redacted]

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SUBJECT: Afghanistan: Potential for Soviet Airfield
Construction [Redacted]

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DDI/NESA/SO/P/[Redacted] (4 Jan 82)

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[Redacted]

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Afghanistan: Potential for Soviet Airfield Construction

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan clearly has grave strategic implications for the area and gives Moscow a potential base from which to further threaten Iran and Pakistan. Nonetheless, Soviet military activities in Afghanistan are currently aimed against the insurgency. In particular, the apparent intent of Soviet airfield improvements there, as [redacted], is to increase the number of helicopters in Afghanistan and to expand the maintenance capabilities of Soviet air units engaged in operations against the insurgents. A key indicator of a shift in Soviet focus would be if Moscow began constructing an airfield in southwestern Afghanistan significantly closer to the Persian Gulf than existing bases. [redacted]

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A new Soviet airfield in southwestern Afghanistan would increase Soviet tactical air coverage of southeastern Iran, but we judge that it would give the Soviets few advantages in attacking targets in the Persian Gulf, the Strait of Hormuz, or on the Arabian Peninsula. Of Soviet tactical aircraft, only the SU-24 Fencer tactical bomber would be within effective operational range of the Strait of Hormuz from an airfield built in southwestern Afghanistan. Assuming realistic combat mission profiles that anticipate possible US or Persian Gulf opposition, MIG-27 and SU-17 fighter-bombers would be unable to reach targets in the Persian Gulf from a new airfield and MIG-23 fighters would be operating at the limits of their effective range. Soviet medium bombers--including Backfire and Badger--would not require airbases in Afghanistan to be within range of the Persian Gulf, but could be based in the USSR. [redacted]

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Building a major airbase in southwestern Afghanistan would be costly, time-consuming, and confront nearly insurmountable logistical difficulties. Imagery indicates that the construction of new airbases in the USSR that are capable of sustaining tactical air operations requires a minimum of three years. Moreover, Soviet airbases are typically located along major lines of communication, usually including rail lines. There is virtually no logistical infrastructure in southwestern Afghanistan to support building a new airbase. The Soviets would need to build a road capable of supporting sustained traffic by heavy vehicles and equipment in order to transport the necessary building materials, particularly the large concrete slabs used for constructing runways. The distance from the existing main road connecting the cities of Qandahar and Farah with the USSR to the southwestern corner of Afghanistan is over 100 miles. [redacted]

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[REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] Temporary
combat operations from an improvised airfield in southwestern
Afghanistan would also require logistics support probably beyond
the capabilities of the existing primitive road network in the
area. [REDACTED]

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The Afghan insurgents would likely be able to harass but not
prevent the construction and operation of an airfield in
southwestern Afghanistan. The Soviets would need to assign at
least a ground force regiment to the area to suppress insurgent
activity. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

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Effective Combat Radii of Selected Soviet Tactical Aircraft

MIG-23 fighter	800 km., optimum mission profile 400 km., probable mission profile
SU-17 fighter-bomber	600 km., optimum mission profile 300 km., probable mission profile
SU-24 tactical bomber	700-800 km., probable mission profile

